

Vice President Corers
Global Forum on Fighting Corruption
U.S. Department of State
February 25, 1999

CHRISTIANITY & CORRUPTION AND DEMOCRACY

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As one who for more than twenty years wore the title Professor of Political Ethics, I well know how much that juxtaposition of terms, political and ethics, strikes many folks as an oxymoron. It is therefore a special satisfaction for me to be invited to such a distinguished conference, the very purpose of which is to strengthen ethics in the conduct of government and international affairs.

Before I proceed to suggest some of the positive perspectives that Christian faith may contribute to our conversations, I believe some words of confession may be good for some of our souls.

We meet here to strengthen the integrity of democratic institutions. However, the historic record of Christianity in relation to democracy is, at best, ambiguous. Until the 16th Century, the dominant theologians and ecclesial institutions of Christianity tended to give priority to order over justice. But democratic thought and practice, in their most authentic view, have given priority to justice over order. Which is to say that human rights and principles of consent are essential to the legitimacy of democratic government. Democracy must ultimately rest upon such moral foundations.

Another confession: In practice, Christianity, as well as other religions, is implicated in some of history's most violent and bitter conflicts, both international and domestic. And that implication is all too present in many, if not most, of today's most serious conflicts -- whether in Ireland, the Balkans, the Middle East, or south Asia.

Then, too, Christian institutions themselves are not strangers to the problems of corruption in their own life. They have held on to properties and investments that have exploited poor people -- and have often attempted to conceal such facts. And they have coveted special political privileges contrary to the integrity of democratic institutions. One of the most troubling defaults of too many churches is their tendency to camouflage their own conflicts, special interests, and -- yes -- corrupt practices by pious insistence on loyalty and harmony and devotion.

But there is a yet-deeper sense in which Christian faith itself knows a lot about corruption. It is our very creeds' seriousness about the reality and depths of human sinfulness. Modern and even post-modern **persons may cringe** at the mere mention of such notions as original sin and the depravity of human nature. But who can deny, at the end of this most terrible century of wars and totalitarianisms and genocides and violent economic crimes and oppression that all human types are capable of the most inhuman things?

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